

## **Desistance from crime: reflections on the transitional experiences of young people with a history of offending**

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the complexities involved in young people's attempts to move away from criminal activity. This paper draws on qualitative data from a study that aimed to identify how young people negotiate transitions away from offending. The paper argues that an analysis of the subtle shifts in young people's perceptions and interpretations of their situation sheds light on the complex nature of desisting from crime. To do so, the paper focuses on the role of relevance in order to explore how these subtle shifts in thinking enable young people to reinterpret their lives and move towards desistance. By way of undertaking this analysis, this paper draws on Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach to the nature of relevance to explore how young people shift between their known world of 'doing crime' and an unknown world of being 'straight and legitimate'.

**Keywords:** crime; risk; transition; youth culture; Alfred Schutz

I've seen my mates get stomped on ... beaten ... smashed ... you end up dead or worse ... brain fucked ... my life has been on a pathway to gaol, hospital or dead ... all pathways to nowhere ... but I haven't found the right pathway that will lead me out of here.... (male, 18 years)

Desperate times call for desperate measures; we held up service stations and stole food from supermarkets. Trying to get money when you don't have anywhere to stay is really hard; social workers and that ... they want to help you but you have to live like they say and I didn't want anyone telling me what to do or how to live my life.... (female, 22 years)

### **Introduction**

The reality that some young people become involved in crime and that their lives can be cut short or seriously damaged is exemplified in the above extracts. The experiences depicted in these quotations indicate that the transition between doing crime and desisting is complex. It can involve elements of danger, and there is no guarantee that locating a pathway that leads away from crime will in fact enable the person to stop offending. This paper is drawn from a study that explored how young people negotiate the transition from doing crime to not doing crime.<sup>1</sup> According to

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the participants, the ability to choose between doing crime and desisting was plagued by insecurity regarding their capacity to maintain a 'straight and legitimate' lifestyle, living a life devoid of excitement, and the view that others judge their criminal past. For the majority of participants, doing crime was part of their everyday existence; whether from a necessity to gain food and shelter or as part of the enculturation process to be accepted into particular groups, crime was part of the world of these young people. The stories they told about their attempts to change highlighted the significance of subtle shifts in *their* interpretation of the situation, which, in turn, provided the possibility for change to occur.

This paper takes the view that exploring the manner in which these subtle shifts in interpretation emerge can add to understanding how young people move through transitional experiences that lead away from crime. In conveying their views about offending and desisting, their stories highlight the temporal nature of any attempt to change. While the majority of the participants acknowledged that doing crime had become 'a hassle' or 'was not worth the trouble', they still found the move away from offending difficult and convoluted, and it created unanticipated problems. That young people have transitional experiences is without doubt. The move through childhood and adolescence and on to adulthood brings complex changes in all aspects of a person's life: physiological, psychological and social changes make transitions an integral aspect of being a young person. For some young people, the sense of moving through the 'rites of passage' is an integral part of becoming an adult and taking on the role of citizen. Turner (1969, p. 98) suggests that young people moving through transitions are in a liminal phase in which they can fall in the interstices of social structures. For some, this can result in risk-taking behaviour; for others, it can be a time for experimentation and recognition in order to establish themselves in an adult world.

In this paper, I suggest that focusing on the ways in which 'something' becomes relevant will contribute to our understanding of the move away from criminal activity. To do so, I argue that Alfred Schutz's analysis of the systems of relevance provides insights into the ways in which young people move towards desistance. The implications drawn from this analysis suggest that for young people to desist from crime requires some essence of doubt around their usual ways of thinking and acting. It also requires recognition that this shift for young people encompasses significant loss and a heightened sense of vulnerability in the transition phase, and, importantly, this approach also highlights that for alternative choices to emerge, young people need encouragement and motivation to believe that transformation is indeed possible. I am not going to argue, however, that these insights are new or challenge previously held views regarding how young people desist from criminal activity. Nevertheless, I believe that adopting Schutz's approach to the way in which 'things' become relevant provides an additional way to explore the micro-dynamic principles that affect the choices we make in our daily lives. Schutz's analysis of the interrelationship between consciousness, action and meaning illuminates the process around interpretation, and his work also sheds light on the underlying dynamics that attach to our motives for acting in particular ways. Focusing on these minute details that shore up the ways in which our daily lives are rendered meaningful has a number of implications for analysing transitions away from crime.

Alfred Schutz's work has a marginal status in relation to social theory (Endress 2005, p. 51); however, it is his analysis of the individual in the everyday that has

influenced phenomenological sociology (Vaitkus 1991; Wilson 2005, p. 20). While his work covers a range of topics within the gamut of the everyday world, the analytical themes that this project will utilize include his analysis of routine action, the structural components of choice, the imperative of doubt, and, finally, Schutz's analysis of the two modes of motivation. These key themes provide a way to understand the complex thinking processes that go on behind any attempt to change. Furthermore, they also highlight the linkages that must be developed between structural interventions such as employment, education and secure housing *and* changes that emerge at the level of identity. Finally, adopting these key themes will also provide valuable insights into the ways in which young people choose between competing interests such that their actions can lead them away from doing crime.

There are ongoing debates over the most effective approach to assist young people to stop offending (Cohen and Ainley 2000, Mizen 2002, Raffe 2003, Barry 2007). Current research into youth transitions has provided valuable insight into the ways in which young people's experiences are framed by social, cultural and political contexts (Cohen and Ainley 2000). Of specific interest is the shift from childhood to adolescence, as this is the period where young people aim to establish their identity as 'grown-up' or in some way different from their childhood status (James and James 2001). The shift from school to work or from school to other forms of education or training has been effected by what Sennett (2006) terms 'new capitalism', which emphasizes the linkages between neo-liberal policies and the diminished capacity of states to protect against international decision making by private corporations on some issues (Olssen 2004, p. 239). This has led to more insecurity in employment markets and a greater emphasis on 'up-skilling' and 'multi-skilling' in order to facilitate a 'flexible' workforce that are 'job ready' and 'job smart'.

Transitions into and through criminal activity have also been explored through concepts such as 'pathways into and out of crime'. These can take a developmental approach that supports an ontogenic explanation that offenders 'grow up' and desist from crime (Glueck and Glueck 1968, Gottfredson and Hirshi 1990, Moffit 1993). Further research has also highlighted the importance of sociogenic explanations. These foreground social connections and the development of strong bonds between people. Hardwick and Brannigan (2008) take up these explanatory models in order to highlight the ways in which both ontogenetic and sociogenic factors mediate an individual's behaviour in a bid to explore how self-control can buffer the effects of criminal activity. McGuire (2002) also argues that long-term desistance for repeat offenders requires initial forms of intervention that focus on the interplay between individuals' thoughts, feeling and behaviour, and, accordingly, that such interventions are better placed within the community than from an institutional setting (McGuire 2002, pp. 201–202).

The literature on desistance suggests that transitions from persisting with crime to desistance require a combination of meaningful social attachments and changes in identity (Bottoms *et al.* 2004, p. 381). Desistance from crime is an unusual concept to grasp, as it is concerned with capturing the circumstances and characteristics that involve a sustained absence of an event (Maruna 2001). This can pose problems for researchers when asking people to explain how and why they stop doing something. Proving that one is *not* doing crime is often far more difficult than establishing oneself as a 'criminal'. Piquero *et al.* (2004) suggest therefore that the lulls between

episodes of offending are particularly important in grasping the transitional nature of desisting from crime.

The issue of choice and decision making is pertinent to desistance and transitions away from offending, as a one-off decision to change is not the norm for most people attempting to transform their lives. While the movement is 'towards desistance' (Bottoms *et al.* 2004), this can oscillate between episodes of offending and long lulls between them (Farrall 2002). One point that does need to be explored is what, if any, effect these lulls can have on the meanings and perceptions offenders associate with doing crime. Bottoms *et al.* (2004) suggest that the type of crime and the reasons for offending affect the offender's sense of self. This suggests that the transition from perceiving oneself as a 'serious and habitual offender to that of a small-time or occasional offender' may indeed be a long-term proposition (Bottoms *et al.* 2004, p. 384).

In both the literatures on desistance and youth transitions, the processes of change are emphasized. For youth transitions, change is explored through shifts in economic, social and political domains that highlight instability and uncertainty (Bottrell and Armstrong 2007, p. 356) and foreground the view that youth transitional experience requires flexibility, adaptability and reinvention (Rose 1996, Beck 2000, Furlong and Kelly 2005). In desistance literature, change is explored through employment, relationships and maturation; as such, these analyses do emphasize that the shift away from 'doing crime' is gradual and requires changes at multiple levels (Maruna 2001, Giordano *et al.* 2002).

The work of Anthony Giddens (1991, 1995) has also been employed to explore how young people engage in and move away from criminal activity (Lupton and Tulloch 2002, Pilkington 2007). Like Alfred Schutz, Giddens also focuses on day-to-day activities and routine habits (Giddens 1984, p. 60), the structure of choice (Giddens 1991, p. 80), and the way in which motivation affects actions and thoughts (Giddens 1984, p. 6).<sup>2</sup> For Giddens, the everyday world is rendered meaningful through the connection between knowledge and trust which constitutes 'ontological security' (1991, p. 36), thereby enabling people to 'go on' about their daily lives. For Giddens, this provides a '*protective cocoon*' (Giddens 1991, p. 40; emphasis in original) to bracket off the inherent dangers of modern life. His analysis of this 'cocoon' highlights the imperative of feeling secure and familiar and that routine is an integral aspect of our daily lives. However, Giddens' work glosses over the underlying thought processes that enable people to reinterpret their known 'protective cocoons' such that a shift towards an alternative 'cocoon' is possible. Certainly, Giddens does highlight that transitional experience is a form of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens 1984, p. 62); however, his analysis does not focus the underlying dynamics of interpretation, and, as such, his work does not provide an effective lens to reveal how subtle shifts in interpretation affect meaning and action.

This paper takes the view that the above analyses contribute to our understanding of why young people move away from offending. However, the paper argues that a more detailed analysis of the minute linkages between thought, action and meaning will shed light on the complexities of how people reinterpret their situation such that moving away from crime becomes possible. The paper argues therefore that grasping this reinterpretation process contributes significant insights into the move towards desistance. In the first part of the paper, I outline the sample and methods

employed in the project. Next, I elaborate on the key themes of the research project; these include crime as a normal part of the participants' everyday actions, the importance of making a personal decision to stop doing crime, and the difficulties involved in staying motivated to stick to their decision. Thereafter, I draw out these recurrent themes through an analysis of Schutz's view of relevance with particular emphasis on the role of routine action, decision making and the structure of motivation.

### **Why they desist: outline of sample and methods**

#### ***Participants***

The interview cohort consisted of 25 people aged 14–24 years. This was broken into two age categories: 14–17 years old (15 interviews) and 18–24 years old (10 interviews). Of these, 8 were female and 17 males. The criteria for selecting participants included age, gender, history of criminal activity and an articulation that they wanted to change their life. Articulating this 'want' was indicated by attending youth centres, discussing aims and needs with centre staff, enrolling in new courses of study, and participating in programmes in support agencies. The sample was drawn from providers of services for 'at-risk' youth. The conviction types for the participant group ranged from one-off juvenile cautions, juvenile detention, community service, and imprisonment. The types of offending included minor offences, such as shoplifting or graffiti that resulted in a caution process, and on to more serious offences such as stealing cars, joyriding, assault, a variety of drug-related offences, breaking and entering, fraud, prostitution and armed robbery.<sup>3</sup>

The interviews were conducted in cafes, hostels, community halls, offices, drop-in centres, youth activity centres, Police and Citizens Youth Clubs<sup>4</sup> and private residences. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to over 1 hour, with questions focusing on how people became involved in crime, whether they were still doing crime, why they had started to move away from crime, their views regarding forms of support in the community, and the role of parents, family and friends.

The majority of the older age group lived in shared housing, one participant lived with his parents, and two participants were living 'on the streets'; in the younger age group, only one participant lived outside the family home – that is, in a hostel after an extended period of homelessness. All of the 14–17-year-olds were attending an education facility; of the older group, all had completed Year 10<sup>5</sup> and four had completed Year 12.<sup>6</sup> In terms of employment, two of the 18–24-year-olds had formal qualifications and held down a job, and three were studying part-time.

#### ***Methods***

This project employed a qualitative framework in order to foreground how each person rendered their life meaningful. The research design employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews in order to allow for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and to draw out sensitive details (Johnson 2000). This approach was delivered in a flexible and responsive way so as best to capture the participants' experiences and interpretations. The sequence of questions did vary depending on the participant's responses and their chosen direction for the interview,

thus replicating a conversational format (Bryman 2004). The interviews fielded information on their biographies, criminal activity, peer and family relationships, experience of and views on the criminal justice system, decision-making strategies, and plans for the future.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key findings: routine actions and habitual thinking**

For the majority of the young people in this study, engaging in crime became part of their normal, everyday experience. For those who were living on the streets or spending much time there, doing crime was part of 'hanging out together'. Several of the participants explained that doing crime was 'fun' and 'exciting'. For some, doing crime was a necessary part of their survival; shoplifting and stealing money for food or drugs were necessities that appeared to be the 'best' option. For others, doing crimes such as car theft served several purposes. For one group, it was simply a means to an end – in other words, they wanted to go somewhere and needed the transport; thus, taking a car became a pragmatic decision. For others, however, stealing cars was concerned with establishing themselves as an 'expert' – it added to their status within their peer group – while for another group, car theft was associated with 'having fun, driving fast, doing burn-outs and hooning through the bush'.<sup>8</sup>

The normalizing characteristics of offending were evident in the way in which the participants discussed their involvement in crime. Doing crime was always discussed in relation to the status of the crime, whether the person was engaged in 'doing big crime' or 'doing small crime'. Big crime referred to armed robbery, dealing in large quantities of drugs, assault with weapons, such as knives or guns, and serial car theft. Small crime, on the other hand, included stealing, taking drugs, shoplifting, breaking into cars, joyriding, prostitution, fraud and 'mobbing'.<sup>9</sup> The participants spoke of the shift between doing big crime and doing small crime, with the latter being more prevalent in their move towards desistance. The views regarding this normalizing nature of doing crime are typified in the comments from two of the participants.

Living on the streets you have to do crime, if you don't you get stomped on, beaten up. You need to do it, small stuff, not big crime ... we'd steal money from buses, steal credit cards and max 'em out ... it's just what you do to survive.... (male, 17 years)

I'd just hang out at the train station, never in the city but one of the outer suburbs, and wait for mates to turn up. We'd never speak, but we'd know what to do – when someone would turn up at the station we'd just mob 'em and take their stuff. Mostly they'd give it up pretty quick.... (male, 19 years)

The normalizing aspects of language can be witnessed in the status attributed to particular crimes. By situating some crimes as 'big' and others as 'small', it establishes the features attributed to each category and provides a unifying point for those involved in doing crime. In a Schutzian sense, this provides an interpretative schema that renders their actions meaningful (Schutz 1973, p. 246). Irrespective of the age group and location from which the participants were drawn, all participants labelled the same crimes as either big or small. Moreover, the use of this everyday language to describe the types of crimes people engaged in also contributed to the ways in which these young people understood themselves as offenders; in other

words, serious offenders engaged in big crime while those either experimenting or attempting to move away from crime engaged in small crime.

Another example of the routine nature of doing crime relates to the way in which risk-taking becomes normalized. This was especially prevalent for people involved in taking crystal methamphetamine (ICE). Several participants explained that the ICE scene on the streets was prevalent and dangerous. One common practice of obtaining ICE was called 'rorting'; that is, stealing quantities of ICE and money from dealers in the area.

When you're into ICE you'd do anything for it, once it gets into you, it grabs you by the balls and won't let you go ... you just want more.... We'd rort dealers ... [that is,] go to the dealer's place and buy a few bags and check out who and what was there, then we'd meet up with our mates and go back and smash up the place. We'd have star pickets, knives, baseball bats and just smash up everything and take the drugs and the money ... you can't get caught ... they can't call the cops ... we didn't think it as dangerous, we'd get off on the buzz of doing it.... (male, 21 years)

These descriptions suggest that actions, once rendered as routine, function instantaneously without space for consideration. There is a layering of expectation around possible outcomes and a build-up of knowledge regarding how to act in these situations such that actions become automatic. According to Schutz's analysis of the everyday world, the acquisition of knowledge is always a sedimentary process (Schutz 1970, p. 78); however, the sedimentation is covered or remains 'passive' such that actions appear as typical and automatic in that situation. In effect, the problematic nature of these actions, in terms of illegality and levels of risk-taking, is collapsed, thus enabling them to become part of the everyday experience of these young people.

### **Key findings: decision-making processes**

The participants were asked to talk about their attempts to move away from doing crime, and while the majority stated that they wanted to stop doing crime, each person said that he or she was still doing small crime, such as drug-taking, shoplifting or under-age drinking. While they acknowledged their offending, the interviewees invariably commented that the only way truly to change their lives was to make a personal decision to do so. Several points became evident in relation to the role and significance of decision making. First, the older group of participants commented that it was incumbent upon people to make a conscious decision to change their life. One of the young women, who had a long history of offending, commented that it was up to her to change:

I just made the decision that I didn't want to live like that anymore, I didn't need to do all that crime, but no one could make me make the decision, it didn't matter how many programmes I did, I had to decide to change.... Now I am doing some courses and I want to help other kids like me to change their lives.... (female, 20 years)

Decision making for this participant, however, did require 'management'. The participant commented that without a decision nothing would change, but having made the decision to desist, how she lived her life became problematic. In other words, her taken-for-granted way of living had been thrown into question (Schutz 1970, p. 26). For example, her partner was involved in crime, her friends were

involved in drug-taking, and her previous attempts to change her life had failed. On this occasion the participant discussed how she had taken active steps to change by finding a course of study that *she* had chosen; one that was not directed by someone else or part of the requirements necessary to remain out of detention. For her, this felt different from her previous attempts to change.

Another participant discussed how decision making was made in relation to the losses and gains of doing crime. This young man had been involved in dealing in speed and Ecstasy and he felt his attitude to the 'lifestyle' had begun to shift. He spoke about how this 'world' did involve large quantities of money and status in terms of 'punters' – people who buy drugs. He discussed how people would treat him with 'respect' due to his position within the drug-dealing circle. However, he also commented that this life was filled with increasing levels of violence, constantly being on guard, and a general sense of growing paranoia.

It was just my choice, it came from inside me, I just started to change ... I was getting tired of all the hassle ... I went to Sydney to get away from the people here and I have a girlfriend now and I don't want to get back into that life ... you end up dead.... (male, 20 years)

However, the younger group of 14–17-year-olds did not articulate the same sense of a conscious decision to stop offending. Rather, this group indicated that it was more external pressure that made them think about not doing crime; such as pressure from parents, participating in support programmes, and, for some young people, changing schools. Several of the participants commented that they had become involved in crime due to the boring nature of school, the peer group with whom they were involved, and the ease with which one could 'wag' school and hang around in the city or local shopping centres.

The issue of detention was also discussed in relation to their decisions about desisting from crime. For the older age group, two participants had been in adult gaol and three had served periods in juvenile detention. The young men commented that they were fearful of going to prison – they feared the level of violence, sexual assault and possible mental health issues. One of the female participants was also awaiting a court appearance and felt that she might be sentenced to detention. All of these participants commented that they were scared of being 'locked up' and that they did not know how this would affect their life. However, the threat of going to prison in and of itself was not enough to make them stop doing crime. Several comments explain the views about the role of detention in decision making:

Being scared of going to gaol helps me to not get caught. (female, 21 years)

When you're doing crime you don't think about going to gaol ... I only think about getting money quick. ... (male, 20 years)

A final aspect relevant to the transitional experience of these young people is their movement between offending and non-offending. In both age groups, the participants talked about why they wanted to change their lives, but each person also commented that it was much easier to revert to offending than to take a legitimate path. For the younger age group, the capacity to reoffend was connected to their relationships with friends and their social activities. Comments from one of the younger participants help make this point clear:



I'd been staying out of trouble, I wanted to change 'cause it was making my mum and dad sick ... I was out with my friends and we stole a car from the servo ... if I'd known it belonged to the old guy I wouldn't have taken it. I didn't really want to but the cops were after us for the graffiti, and the car was there so we took it. ... (male, 16 years)

The lulls between offending and non-offending for the older group highlighted the complex nature of transitions away from crime. The majority of this group acknowledged that drug-taking played a role in their lives and that their involvement in crime was often a by-product of their addiction. However, several of the participants discussed their oscillation between being 'straight and clean' interspersed with episodes of drug-taking and criminal activity. The comments from one participant demonstrate the complex nature of these transitions:

I'd been straight and clean for months ... working and doing well ... I was like normal ... I had a dog and a house and I felt like this is what normal people do. Then I came back here and ... I don't really know how it happens ... there's drugs and I feel like I've been good, one won't hurt, and then I'm back in the old world again. ... (male, 19 years)

For both age groups being aware of decisions and choices played a significant role in their attempts to desist from crime. The points raised by the participants illustrate that the transitional experiences of young people attempting to desist from crime are multi-dimensional. These comments suggest that transitions require some understanding of one's actions and they also demonstrate that decisions are always made in context – social, cultural, political and personal. The findings also indicate that the transition towards desistance includes wavering between the normal and routine world of doing crime, recognizing vulnerabilities that pull these young people back into offending, and attempting to create plans that will lead them towards desistance.

### **Relevance, actions and choice**

The findings from the project support the view that doing crime can for various reasons become normalized and habitual. The extracts from the participants also make clear that transitional experience involves choosing between various actions rather than acting automatically. Schutz's work on the nature of relevance provides an analysis of the minute dynamics that underlie the selection of one form of acting over another at any particular time. That something becomes relevant always refers to the manner in which the 'thing' is interpreted. Our daily lives present a vast array of events, ideas, concrete objects and thoughts from which we select particular 'facts' as a point of focus. As such, we develop our ideas and subsequent actions across a broad range depending on the situation at the time. Schutz explains that the way in which we experience 'things' always pertains to a situation or context – we do not experience an idea or thought in isolation (Schutz 1973, p. 213). This means that the context of our ideas and thoughts provide the content and the form of our stream of thinking (Schutz 1970, p. 44).

A good example of relationship between the context of our thinking and its content and form can be seen in the views presented by one participant, who explained that, while he had tried to change his life around doing crime, he found the process difficult with minimal chance for actual change. This young man stated that

he had been in and out of detention since he was 14. He was currently facing an assault charge and felt he would be sentenced to detention. He explained how doing crime was part of his daily life of living on the streets:

It's fun to do crime, big crime, small crime, it doesn't really matter ... it's not about having a hard life, that's just being a sook ... I've just made bad choices and I will live with them ... I'm a criminal ... it's the job of the coppers to catch me and it's my job not to get caught.... (male, 20 years)

The context of this young man's thinking about doing crime involves his experiences of offending over the past five years, his fractured relationship with his family, being homeless and unemployed, his minimal education, his current relationships with friends in the same situation, drug-taking and, as he explained, his volatile temper. The content of his thinking is shaped by this context such that he views his life as the outcome of selecting one set of choices over and against another – this content provides him with reasons not to complain about the circumstances of his life, as he has interpreted the situation to be a simple matter of choice. The form of his thinking enables him to construct his identity as 'a criminal' whose purpose it is to undertake certain actions but actions that do not come to the attention of the authorities. The combination of context, content and form of our thinking highlights how what is relevant at certain times regulates the construction of reality in our daily lives (Nasu 2008, p. 93).

In that the majority of participants explained that doing crime was normal and a routine part of their daily lives, the processes by which actions with high levels of risk-taking and intensity, such as drug dealing, mobbing and roting, are rendered 'normal' requires exploration. Schutz (1973, p. 222) explains that our everyday encounters with the world at large emphasize the practicality of one's existence and the part of the world that comes within our scope. We accept that there are shared common perceptions and individual characteristics specific to ourselves. We do not experience the world in an isolated manner. The 'things' we encounter are perceived through horizons of familiarity, that is, through anticipating that what we encounter will have some familiar aspect (Schutz 1973, p. 59).

Experiences are considered 'typical' due to the capacity of human consciousness actively to grasp events as topics or themes of experience (Schutz 1973, p. 280). Once grasped as a theme, they are then generalized across the broad range of domains that make up our daily lives such that the experience is interpreted as typical for that type of event. This process provides the background detail to our daily lives, the 'home-base', or a common point of reference for our daily existence (Schutz 1970, p. 35). These modes of typicality provide the underlying basis for the way in which something becomes relevant in our daily lives. This can be imposed from things outside our control, such as time and space, or our biographical situation, and, as such, they cannot be ignored (Schutz 1970, p. 28). Something can also become relevant through the intrinsic nature of consciousness, through the way in which we focus our attention. All forms of attention add to our knowledge and build up the rules of thumb by which we know, interpret and understand our world (Schutz 1970, p. 122). For the young man in the above example, each act of offending adds to his habitual knowledge base regarding 'doing crime', subsequently fulfilling his expectations based on similar acts in the past, and further motivating him to

reproduce these acts in the future. In effect, this young man's relevance systems act to shore up his world as the taken-for-granted world of doing crime.

That experiences are rendered as 'typical' does not mean that all of our experiences are compatible and consistent. This was clearly demonstrated by the participants in regard to their wanting to change their lives, knowing that change was necessary but finding this very difficult. The intrinsic nature of consciousness always draws in opposing topics that can be present simultaneously. Schutz (1970, p. 120) explains this as the counterpointal structure of our mind, and it is due to this characteristic that changes in interpretation and action occur. While the layering of perceptions and knowledge regarding routine actions builds up expectations and anticipations regarding outcomes, interruptions occur that spark off challenges and revisions to habits, routine thoughts and typical experiences.

Interruptions can occur through a range of processes that can emerge from outside our control, while others can have a more voluntary basis. For example, an imposed interruption to doing crime can come from the various forms of detention; a voluntary interruption can emerge from changes in perception, as with the young participant whose shift in focus emphasized the violent nature of drug dealing when previously it had been seen as 'exciting'. These changes shift something previously interpreted as 'adequate' into something that is problematic. It is this shift that leads into the very nature of transitional experience. For most of the young people in the study, interruptions to the routine nature of doing crime emerged from a shift of focus or an unexpected occurrence which challenged their previously held ideas.

This dynamic process is exemplified in an extract from one of the participants, who discussed how the relevant circumstances around his doing crime altered through reconnecting with his family. He talked about leaving home due to not getting on with his family, and he discussed how he felt jealous of the attention given to his younger siblings, which he interpreted as his parents not caring enough for him. After 18 months of living on the streets, he contacted his parents and they started to meet regularly. He explained:

I get on better with my parents now. They want me to come home but I can't, it's too hard ... I've got hostel accommodation now and I'm finishing high school and we'll see how things go. ... They seem really happy to see me and I hope things keep going. ...  
(male, 17 years)

This changed circumstance raised the idea that his parents did care for him and were concerned about his future. In effect, these meetings had rendered 'problematic' his prior perception that his parents did not care for him, and therefore it became relevant for him to revisit his existing ideas about his family.

This example highlights that the way in which something becomes relevant emerges from a comparison between similar experiences; thus, differences can be noted that challenge the routine status of the experience. Schutz explains that it is through a comparison between what is unfamiliar and what has previously been known that the issue is rendered questionable (Schutz 1970, p. 37). This is an ongoing process until interpretation is adequate for the purpose at hand. Two important points need to be raised on this matter: first, the manner in which something becomes interpretatively relevant refers to the breakdown of what had previously been taken for granted; and, second, that something emerges as

problematic and is interpreted as such always relates to its prior unproblematic nature (Schutz 1970, p. 124).

That alternative positions and views emerge does not necessarily engender the capacity to choose between competing actions, thoughts and ideas. As the previous example demonstrates, it had become relevant for the young man to reconsider his interpretation of his family. Choosing to act on the problematic nature of the relationship was not, however, an automatic response. For choice to occur and decisions to be made, Schutz presents a micro-analysis of the structure of choosing that challenges the idea the people are faced with a crossroad and must choose a particular path. Certainly, for choice to occur, there must be competing interests; it is not simply a random selection from one's imagination. Choice must involve an element of doubt – that is, something that was once accepted as normal and routine, taken for granted, has been thrown into question – there is doubt regarding something that was previously regarded as 'fact' (Schutz 1973, p. 86). Without the existence of doubt, deliberation and decision making will not occur.

Before moving on to the matter of choice, we note an important aspect of deliberation that directly relates to transitional experience. In the process of doubt and the subsequent interpretation of relevant competing interests, there is also an element of loss. Schutz explains this as a 'vacancy' until new topics and interpretations emerge (Schutz 1970, p. 116). Again this is exemplified in the story of the young man reconnecting with his family. He is in some sense caught between worlds: the world of doing crime, where his identity is known, and this unknown world of being a son and a brother, where his identity is less clear. This aspect of the transitional phase is imperative to grasp for young people attempting to desist from crime, in that the 'vacancy' represents the dismantling of their taken-for-granted world, and therefore young people are particularly vulnerable until new rules of thumb and home-base knowledge emerges.

The second aspect of choice that is pertinent to transitional experience refers to the view that people choose between competing paths or points in space such that one must choose to go this way or that way. This construction of choice assumes that these 'pathways' exist prior to the individual's deliberation. This is a common assumption to make in that it appears from the point of reflection that someone was presented with two possible paths and simply chose one. Schutz (1973, p. 86) identifies instead that deliberation occurs in time. In other words, prior to the point of doubt and deliberation, there is no pathway that will lead in another direction. Taking up Schutz's analysis of choice in relation to the young man reconnecting with his family highlights that, at this point in time, a pathway out of crime is not clear. He has certainly experienced doubt regarding his identity, his family and his situation. However, in the transitional phase, he is still exploring the problematic nature of his previous interpretations. There is at this point no actual pathway; there are potential pathways. It will not be until this young man's doubt transforms into something more certain, or adequate for the time (Schutz 1973, pp. 91–92), that an actual pathway can emerge. This configuration of making decisions highlights that any decision is not informed by the simple choice between two paths. Rather it is an outcome of a complex process in which the 'rules of thumb' have been thrown into doubt, thus enabling alternative possibilities to emerge that, in turn, provide the capacity for choices to be made.

The final aspect of relevance that is pertinent to transitional experience is the incentive that instigates changes to thinking and acting. I have already established that moving through transitions requires, in the first instance, a situation of doubt, perceiving that there are competing interests and that decisions can only be made when there is a reasonable degree of certainty involved that expected outcomes will come to fruition. Once these characteristics are in play, motives are necessary to bring about an attitude that change can occur, and they are also required to put plans into action to bring about the desired transformation (Schutz 1973, p. 71). For example, the young man referred to above talked about why he contacted his parents after a long period of living on the streets. He said the initial prompt came from feeling that he could die on the streets and that he wanted help to change his life. In this initial phase of his transition away from crime, his reinterpretation of the situation as problematic made it relevant for him to act outside what was normal. Thus, contacting his family was one particular action that could assist with bringing about his plan to change his life.

According to Schutz's understanding of relevance, this action is part of the in-order-to motives that are necessary to bring about the preconceived goal (Schutz 1973, p. 71). Motives of this configuration attach to ideas relevant to the goal, thereby establishing a degree of certainty that their actions will bring about the outcome (Schutz 1970, p. 48). These motives provide a framework for the ongoing process such that the necessary steps can be taken. A second layer of motives is also integral to moving through the transitional experience. This group of motives refers to the impetus for the overall goal to develop in the first place (Schutz 1973, p. 71). Referred to as 'because motives', they provide an objective glance for people to reconstruct the steps that brought about the state of affairs that led to the development of the future goal (Schutz 1973, p. 72). In this context, 'because' motives provide an explanation as to how someone arrived at their desired goal. In reference to the young man above, his goal to change his life emerged 'because' of his living on the streets, his past offending, and his fear that he could die from this situation. Both levels of motive are integral to transitional experiences. The former provides young people with a framework that will assist them to move towards desisting from crime. This is especially reassuring in episodes of reoffending, as the plan provides a safety net when incentives to keep going decrease. The latter are integral to instigate an attitude that transforming one's life is indeed possible. Recognizing the role of both forms of motives highlights that moving through transitions requires acknowledging where one has come from in order to move towards future possibilities.

## **Conclusion**

In relation to transitions away from crime, Schutz's analysis of the characteristics that constitute transitional experience and the interrelated nature of the role of relevance demonstrate the complexity involved in all attempts to change. For the young people in this study, most aspects of their lives appear as problematic. In many respects, the problematic nature of their lives is normal and taken for granted; however, for change to occur and choices to be made, challenges to the taken-for-granted nature of the world of 'doing crime' need to emerge. As Schutz's analysis of relevance highlights, what is relevant at one point in time may not be relevant at

another, indicating that it is imperative to acknowledge that desisting from crime requires changes in perceiving, thinking and acting.

The participants' descriptions of their attempts to desist from crime indicated that transitional experiences involve moving between automatic actions and developing considered options. In this context, transitions away from crime require interruptions to known and routine ways of acting. These interruptions (which can emerge from various contexts, social, cultural, political and biographical) must be interpreted by the person as a challenge to the taken-for-granted nature of *their* everyday existence. Without a significant change in people's interpretation of their actions, the possibility for change to occur is limited. This is particularly relevant to research and intervention strategies that focus on factors such as employment, education, relationships or risk management, as Schutz's work highlights that these factors alone will not assist people with their transition to desistance. Instead, such factors must be linked into the ways in which thought, interpretation and perception affect decision making, action and behaviour.

The importance of the dynamics behind these transitional experiences demonstrates the significance that relevance plays in all forms of transitional experience. The descriptions and extracts from the young people involved in this study highlight that changing one's life of doing crime is complex and convoluted; it involves loss and uncertainty as well as engaging with alternative ways of thinking and acting. While the literature on transitional experiences emphasizes the importance of flexibility for young people, and desistance literature foregrounds the significance of reconstituting one's identity as a non-offender, this paper has demonstrated that the manner in which something becomes relevant plays an integral role in young people's transitional experience away from crime.

## Notes

1. The research project was funded by a Lotterywest Social Research Grant in conjunction with the Institute of Restorative Justice and Penal Reform, Western Australia.
2. Giddens has also commented on the work of Schutz. See Giddens 1979, 1995, pp. 237–243.
3. Juvenile justice in Western Australia is governed by the Young Offenders Act 1994 (WA). This legislation is built on a three-tier system that aims to divert young people away from detention and into community-based programmes. Diversion Level 1 involves a formal caution either from the police or the Children's Court. Diversion Level 2 involves more serious crimes and can result in a Community-Based Order whereby people undertake community-based work under supervision. Diversion Level 3 is the most serious form of intervention; it can result in a Conditional Release Order under supervision, or, as a last resort, it can involve detention. All diversionary levels require attendance with a Juvenile Justice Team. This team then negotiates between all the parties involved: the young person, the family and the victim to establish a satisfactory outcome. This system is based on a multi-agency approach similar to the Youth Offending Teams developed in the UK. [www.aic.gov.au/conferences/juvenile/wells](http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/juvenile/wells) [Accessed 12 December 2008].
4. PCYCs are clubs run in partnership between the Western Australian Police and community groups; they are especially designed to engage young people in a broad range of activities that aim to enhance citizenship, friendship, sport, recreation and education.
5. Year 10 is the last year of junior high school in Western Australia; it is the minimum education standard required for young people to leave school.
6. Year 12 is the final year of high-school education in Western Australia; it provides young people with a gateway into tertiary education.
7. The extracts presented are the young people's accounts of their experiences; they include age and gender but no further descriptors are included in order to maintain confidentiality.

8. 'Hooning through the bush' or 'hooning' in any form refers to young people displaying reckless behaviour; in this case, it refers to driving in a reckless manner either in the city or on the outskirts of the city, which includes tracts of bush land.
9. 'Mobbing' is a term used by several of the young people in the study. It refers to a group of people surrounding a person at a train or bus station, often threatening them and then stealing their belongings – money, bag, shoes – whatever items the group of people want. This was explained in detail by the project participants.

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